MUSCOVITE FRONTIER POLICY: THE CASE OF THE KHANATE OF KASIMOV

The phrase “Muscovite frontier policy” evokes the concept of defense and, most prominently, defense against Tatar incursions along the southern frontier. Defending that frontier involved the establishment of fortified lines, which culminated in the construction of the Belgorod line in the mid-seventeenth century. By that time the defense line was manned by military personnel who had settled near garrison towns.1 But some Muscovite acts, undertaken on the frontier and including settlement of military forces on the border, were also determined by policies and directed toward goals other than defense. This article will examine one such act, the creation of a defensive frontier military settlement called the Khanate of Kasimov, which was established on Muscovy’s southern frontier in the middle of the fifteenth century. It will be demonstrated that the Muscovite motives for the establishment of that settlement and its subsequent use of the khanate were not strictly to improve defense, but were integrated with prevailing foreign policy problems and their solutions.

The Khanate of Kasimov was formed when Grand Prince Vasilii II granted the frontier town of Gorodets (Meshcherskii gorodok) to a Tatar prince Kasim in the 1450s.2 According to V. V. Vel’iaminov-Zernov, who wrote an expansive history of the Kasimov khanate over a century ago, the selection of the territory granted to Kasim was based precisely on defensive considerations. He explained that although the Golden Horde itself had ceased to be a threat by the mid-fifteenth century, the new Khanate of Kazan constituted a serious danger. Gorodets, located on the Oka River, blocked the road between Kazan and Moscow. George Vernadsky echoed this view, but explained further that “the town of Gorodets-on-the-Oka was chosen ... to deal with encroachments of both the Kazan and the Saray hordes.” Kasim’s function, accordingly, was to defend the Muscovite border.3

2. V. V. Vel’iaminov-Zernov, Izslledovanie Kasimovskikh tsariakh i tsarevichakh, 2 parts (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademia nauk, 1863-64), 1: 33.
The location of Gorodets served defensive interests. The first defense line, created by the Muscovite government by the last quarter of the fifteenth century, roughly followed the Oka River as it stretched from Kozel'sk in the west to Nizhni Novgorod in the east. Gorodets was located on that line, downstream from Serpukhov, Kashira, Kolomna, and the Riazan' principality and upstream of Murom.

A report made by a contemporary visitor to Muscovy, Ambrogio Contarini, provides additional support for the conclusion that the Tatar settlement was created for defensive purposes. Contarini noted that Ivan III annually travelled around his possessions; when he did so, “he especially look[ed] after a Tatar, in his pay, who command[ed] ... five hundred horsemen, to guard the frontiers of his territory from the incursions of the Tatars.” Vel’iaminov-Zernov identified that Tatar as Dan’iar, Kasim’s son and the second khan of Kasimov.

Several other observable factors, however, suggest that the purpose of settling Tatars in Muscovy in general and creating the Khanate of Kasimov in particular was more complex than simply shoring up a defense line. The first is that Meshcherskii gorodets was not the only land issued to a Tatar prince. A certain Murtaza, identified as a tsarevich and son of a Kazan’ tsar Mustafa, was granted Novyi gorodok on the Oka River in 1472, after he joined the Muscovite force at Serpukhov to defend against the approach of Ahmat, the khan of the Great Horde. Zvenigorod, Kashira and Serpukhov, Iur’ev, and Surozhik were all given at various times between the late fifteenth and mid-sixteenth century to Tatar tsars and tsareviches for their homes and mainte-

6. Vel’iaminov-Zernov, Izsledovanie Kasimovskikh tsariakh, 1: 80. Conversely to most citations, the Nikon Chronicle on one occasion identifies Dan’iar as the son of one Tregub: see Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei, vol. 12: Letopisnyi sbornik, imenueymi Patriarshiei ili Nikolovskoiu letopisu (St. Petersburg: Arkheograficheskai komissiia, 1901), 149 (hereafter PSRL) and also Vel’iaminov-Zernov, Izsledovanie Kasimovskikh tsariakh, 1: 80.
7. Vel’iaminov-Zernov, Izsledovanie Kasimovskikh tsariakh, 1: 74, 78, 82. It is noteworthy that no known khan of Kazan’ was named Mustafa. See Vel’iaminov-Zernov’s comments on Mustafa’s identity, 1: 82.